

**Testimony of David Sutherland – Director of Government Relations
Before the Appropriations Committee – February 17th, 2017**

Regarding Impacts of Proposed Cuts to DEEP on the General Fund

Any cuts proposed for the DEEP in the next biennium budget should be viewed in the context of the crippling cuts that the agency has been suffering for the past 10 years.

In 2007-08, the Conservation and Regulatory divisions of DEEP (*the portion of DEEP not including PURA*) had **803** State-funded positions. They currently have **671** positions. So even before any further cuts this year, **their state-funded staff has already been reduced in the last ten years by over 16%.**

One of the many results of this reduced staffing and funding is that **Connecticut now ranks 49th in the country in the percentage of the State budget that is used to maintain our State Parks system.**

One of the challenges facing the DEEP and the General Fund is that if the agency is forced to absorb many more cuts, **that will also entail negative impacts on the General Fund.** Further significant cuts will result in the elimination of many, if not all, seasonal staff positions and/or the staff that supervise them. **It is the seasonal staff that collects the vast majority of the average \$6 million annually that is generated in State Parks and other fees. So the large majority of funds saved by not hiring seasonals would be offset by revenue that would be lost for the General Fund.**

Though employed for only part of the year, seasonal employees perform many vital functions aside from collecting site fees, including lifeguarding at State swimming areas, monitoring beaches and other areas for water quality, assisting DEEP law enforcement staff with patrols, assisting with mosquito eradication projects, cleaning State Parks, and many others. Between Memorial Day and Labor Day, seasonals make up 85% of the staffing at our State Parks.

The solution is not to simply eliminate full-time positions, and keep seasonal positions. Those seasonals have to be supervised by full-time, experienced staff, whose ranks have been cut to the bone to perform the many other critical functions with which the agency is charged.

We maintain that the best solution to this problem for the DEEP and the General Fund consists of two components, and urge this committee to work with the Finance and Environment Committees to:

- first, establish a dedicated Conservation Fund, through which revenues collected at State Parks and Forests would be directed towards the maintenance and staffing of those facilities. Connecticut is one of only two states which does not direct any of its Parks revenues back to those parks.

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- second, establish a Passport to the Parks program, in which those registering motor vehicles in Connecticut would be assessed an extra ten dollars for the two-year registration in exchange for which they would have unlimited access to our State Parks. The revenues from this surcharge should be deposited in the Conservation Fund. Aside from providing consistent funding for the Parks, and thereby assuring a much safer and cleaner visitor experience, this program would relieve traffic backups entering our Parks. Some staff would still be needed to collect fees from out of state vehicles, but far fewer would be needed since Connecticut cars could proceed in quickly with just a visual sighting of their license plate.

The concept of public parks – large natural areas open to all citizens – is one of America’s important contributions to the world. For over 100 years, previous generations here in Connecticut have worked to leave future generations with a priceless legacy, our extraordinary State Parks system. Our generation has been seriously degrading that legacy and is now on the verge of virtually shutting it down. There are good, feasible measures we can take to prevent that, and we urge the committee to work to implement them.